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from Oh How Can I Keep on Singing?

Jana Harris

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From *Oh How Can I Keep on Singing?*

JANA HARRIS



by Laura Bienen

JANA HARRIS

Introductory Notes

In 1888 homesteading families began arriving in Washington Territory's Okanogan River Valley, a narrow isolated desert region about fifty miles northwest of the future site of the Grand Coulee Dam. Already teeming with miners, the area was also attractive to cattlemen. Because the nation was suffering from economic depression, free land was a major incentive to the heavily mortgaged California farmer as well as to those in the East who'd lost their jobs and homes due to the streamlining of the railroads and related industries. In addition, the Okanogan's dry desert climate promised relief for those afflicted with tuberculosis, a major killer of the time.

The first white women in this region faced incalculable difficulties and not just those of isolation from family and friends. There were no schools, Protestant churches, doctors, roads, mail service, milled lumber, or credit even if there had been a store. Anyone a day's ride away was considered a near neighbor. One pioneer wife killed three hundred rattlesnakes in front of the tent she and her four small children were living in during the summer following her arrival.

As if to give credence to rumors of a mild climate, their first winter was so warm that the rocky sage brush-covered terrain could be tilled in February. Their second winter, however, was disastrous. Blizzards and record-breaking cold temperatures killed almost all livestock. The only cattle and horses to survive were those brought into the homesteaders' temporary dwellings, usually dugouts. Food was scarce and animal feed was totally exhausted. In the spring, many settlers were struck down by an epidemic of typhoid complicated by pneumonia. For some reason the men were often more incapacitated by these illnesses than the women. It was not uncommon for a pioneer wife to put her infant on her back, crawl out to a downed cow too weak to graze, and raise it by levering a fence rail under its rump.

Often these newcomers' only help were Native Americans, the very people who had been evicted from the land to which the homesteaders now laid claim. Because of the disruption of the Indian tribal structure by the Hudson Bay Company, the United States Government, and the Catholic Church among others, and because of the loss of age-old hunting and gathering territories and exposure to disease, the indigenous people had fallen upon reduced circumstances. Though by nature generous and friendly, the Indians were universally feared and mistrusted by emigrant whites. Probably because the two peoples must have appeared to one another as extraterrestrials, intentions were often misinterpreted. Many a

pioneer wife noted an Indian “begging” a meal at her door. To the Native American, partaking of food together was an overture of friendship, and who better to supply the sustenance than the trespasser. The emigrants, also finding themselves in reduced circumstances after the cattle-killing winter, eventually managed to overcome barriers of culture and language, forging a bond of friendship and survival. Interestingly enough, it was the homesteading wives and children, more often than the heads of household, who accomplished this feat.

The photographs that follow are from private collections and archives in Washington State. The poems, based on documents from the same sources, are an attempt to imagine the lives of two of the women involved in the settlement of the Okanogan Valley.

—JH

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This New Life Abigail Petit, 1890

Sitting on my threshold, I ponder
this new life while waiting for the Indians
to burst into song along with the thud-thunk
of paddles striking the sides
of cottonwood canoes.

A three-month walk here from California.
By the time we crossed the Columbia at Wallula,
the children were shoeless—my son's pants
frayed and short. It would take an expert
to discover the original color of my dress,
so prevailing the patchwork, so ingrained
the particles of dust from the road
and soot from the wrong side of a fire.
Our party was sadly diminished,
some having gone on
to that greater journey beyond.

On the northerly trail, redwood forests so dense
I could scarcely see to read the Bible at noon,
in other places burns gave opening
for daylight. The fires were miles ahead.
As we approached, the air turned dark.
My husband lit the wagon lanterns. The oxen
coughed, their eye-whites reddened.
We had to crawl on the ground
in order to breathe.

At Portland, rain commenced.
Our wagonmaster's invalid mother took cold
from the wetting. After burying her,
we had to go on. Another's youngest soon lay
in a softer bed under the sod.

Descending Mud Mountain, we crossed treacherous
White River five times in one day. Barefoot,
bareheaded, we were in sore straits
for food. "Press on," all men agreed.

Nooning on hardtack
we sounded like pigs cracking corn.
At the last crossing, my husband
unhitched the oxen, swam the team
and floated the wagon. Coming back for me
and the children, he slipped and went under.
The wagonmaster left us to cross a fallen log,
water raging over it, while he conducted a search.
First my son shouldered his sister, then carried
the baby. I couldn't watch. I was frantic.
My turn was next, the white water
made me dizzy. My son took
my hand. My mistake was
looking down. When I fell, branches
tore at my clothes, the water beating me
under. Luckily I was so near the bank,
my boy grasped a branch
with one hand, pulling me up with the other.
Afterward I collapsed. As we entered
a sage valley of shifting sand,
I awoke. The Wagonmaster informed me:
my husband was gone.
The dizziness did not subside.
I saw him at every turn in the trail.

Leaving our party, the children and I
walked here alone. Nights we snuggled up
with the oxen for warmth and signal:
a moving steer, a warning
against wolves stalking campsites.
Ours is a rough one-room my husband built
before bringing us up from San Francisco.
On the journey I told myself: as long as I had
a cabin large enough to swing a broom in,
I'd consider us blessed. We carry
our water up from Virginia Bill's ferry.
When we arrived, the river was filled
with fish and Indian canoes, the air full
of plaintive tunes sung in a minor key
accompanied by the beat of paddle
handles struck against sterns.

The women's voices were splendid,
they never tired. Nor did I of listening.

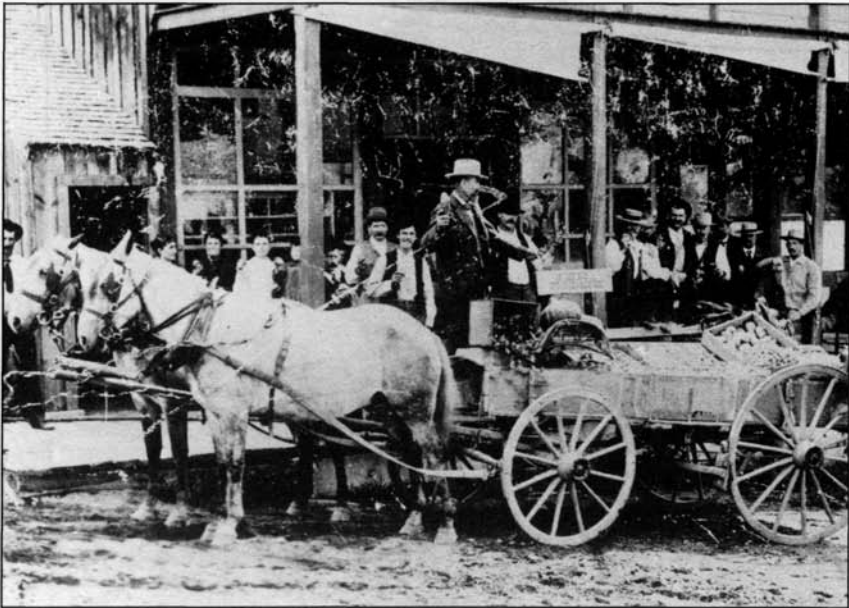
The first winter: a lot of work for a widow
with two children and a ten-year-old boy.
But the Indians were helpful.
For fuel we burned sagebrush and cow-kisses.
We slept in one bed, the quilt so tattered
it failed us. Cloth was fifty cents a yard plus
two days' walk. Virginia Bill's squaw traded me
a blanket of hides sewn with leather laces
in return for watching my sewing machine go.
"Magic," she called it (though I had no cloth
or no thread) and showed me how
to make reed mats stitched together with bark.

Our diet was potatoes without salt,
until a hawk chased a prairie chicken
into the house. My son caught it—our only meat.
I learned to cook camas, my girl chewed
sunflower root like a gum. Come spring,
dandelion soup turned the baby's cheeks pink.

That was a year ago when neighbors
were a day's walk away. Now,
sitting on my threshold, the door open
—I have a door, one of the first in the county,
the hinges are leather—I can see chimney smoke.
A sternwheeler sails twice weekly up river,
alder trees along the bank cut down for fuel.
The Indians have turned surly—one time
some were drunk and I was afraid.
Fishing isn't as plentiful,
the number of dugouts has thinned.
I wait for the valley to fill with voices
and the thud-thunk of paddles.
When it comes, their new song
is weighty and slow, and
the a cappella of women is gone.



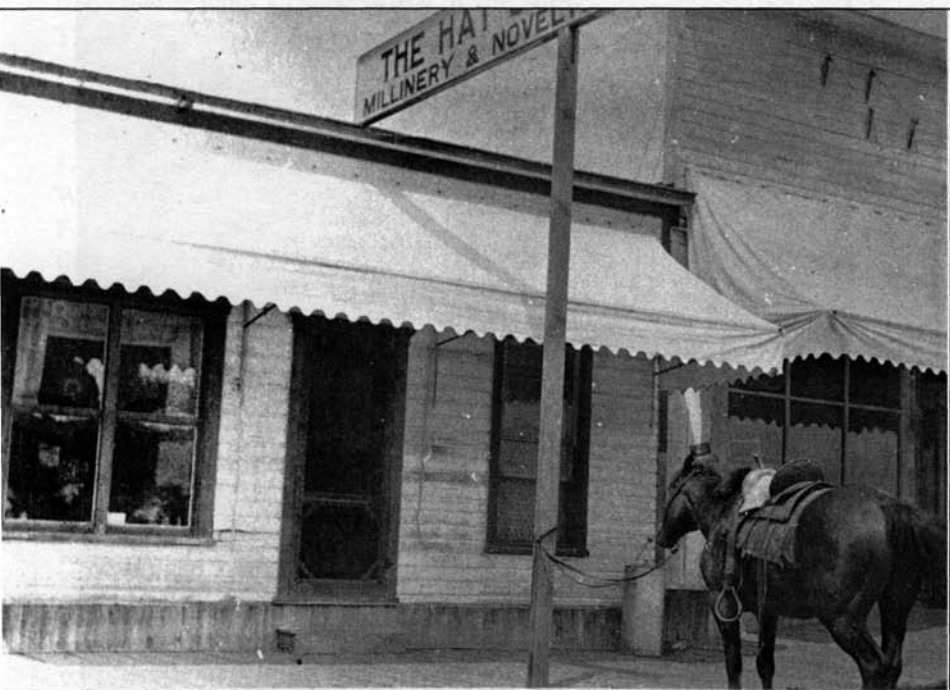














Check-A-Ma-Poo

(*Steelshot Woman*)

Colville Reservation, 1897

First the clothmen came
to the Valley at the Top of the World.
They wore hard shoes,
their legs like tree limbs,
their feet leaving strange prints in the snow.
They came downriver from
where the sun never goes, they came
thick as grasshoppers.

Eena, eena, eena they sang.
We pointed the way to the beaverwood.
Fox, muskrat, even the stink tail
they re-named "money fur."

A starving clothman once came
to my father's house
more than 50 snows ago.
We gave him dried groundhog.
The blanket across his back
was peeling away in strips.
We gave him a cape,
the silky inner bark of cedar.
He gave my father water
the color of peat, cold to the finger,
hot to the tongue.
When the clothman died
we buried him without his steelshot.

The next snow
the first blackrobes appeared, singing,
"Whiskey, whiskey, throw it away."
They howled, "If you do wrong,
the devil will get you," in the manner of
a *talapus* talking to the moon.
It was a bad winter: hard rain,

deep snow; the blackrobes grew
bolder than coyotes.
A blackrobe came to our sweat lodge
and said, "Jesus died instead of you."
My father asked, "What is this to me?"
Chief Joseph who was also there said,
"My horse is faster than your horse."
The blackrobe went on and on:
God, his book; God, his talk; God,
his Jesus Christ Bostonman.

We had no ears which angered them.
They called us root-diggers.
We called them hard shoes.
When Chief Joseph rode against them,
I carried the clothman's gun and rode
my father's fastest horse.

Now I carry greasewood and an ax
made of hard steel.
If you are in need of kindling, sing this song:
"Cut some stovewood,
cut it the length of your forearm."
My song is, "Give me a quarter."
You sing, "Make a fire, boil the water,
cook the meat, wash the dishes.
I will give you a quarter if you
come again tomorrow."

Once I was bringing wood to a clothman,
it was late, a terrible noise
came from the sage beside the door.
Quick, he said, a cougar is eating my sheep.
I did nothing.
A wise being does not annoy the *hyas puss*
after dark while he is eating.
The clothman knocked me to the ground.
That was the first time I sang
a blackrobe song:

"By my deeds, you shall know me."